

ON PAGE 21

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
13 September 1985

Struggles of an Egyptian feminist

By Edward A. Sklepowich

A Bridge Through Time: A Memoir, by Laila Said. New York: Summit Books. 282 pp. \$17.95.

Laila Said's account of her struggle to become a modern woman in Egypt during the past three decades opens with an image that gives resonance to her memoirs and places them in clearer perspective.

One morning her maternal grandmother, Om Abdou (or Mother of Abdou, women in Egypt being traditionally called after their eldest sons), asked for her own coffee to be brought to the table along with her husband's. Although a quiet kind of victory, it made a significant difference in Om Abdou's life and gave her granddaughter hope and inspiration during her formative years.

Ms. Said tells her story directly and engagingly. One of three children from a privileged Coptic family of Cairo, she didn't allow traditional Egyptian society and an arranged marriage to deter her from those great expectations encouraged by her father, a pioneer in radiology in the Arab world. She not only graduated from the prestigious American University of Cairo but also went to the United States on a fellowship and earned a master's degree in English literature at the University of Chicago and a doctorate in theater at the University of Illinois. Despite many setbacks and frustrations, she managed to establish careers as both a university teacher and one of her country's first women theater directors.

Of particular interest is the period in the mid-1970s when she founded her own company in a medieval caravansary and staged a production

about the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war that was a popular and critical success. Another highlight of her career

came in the summer of 1978, when her film on Egyptian feminism, "Where Is My Freedom?" received acclaim at a New York City film festival. At this time she became friends with many American feminists, among them Gloria Steinem, with whom she attended the Tehran, Iran, meetings of the International Committee for the Rights of Women in the spring of 1979.

In the course of her life, Said has been accused of being sympathetic with both the Soviets and the Americans, of creating strife between Copts and Muslims, of disrespecting Muslim traditions and being satanically motivated, and of being an agent for the US Central Intelligence Agency. At one point she was forced to defend herself in court, at a much-publicized trial in which testimony from Simone de Beauvoir and Egyptian feminists was used in her behalf.

In addition to the fascinating story of her public achievements and problems, Said also tells of her private life, her "marriage of convenience" and divorce, her *affaires de coeur*, the death of her younger sister Asma in a car crash, and her estrangement from her mother.

Said wisely places her life within the context of those historical and cultural events of Egypt without which it would lose much of its relevance: the abdication of King Farouk, Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization, the flirtation with and expulsion of the Soviets, the wars with Israel, Anwar Sadat's regime, and the current period under Hosni Mubarak. Her memoirs, written in straightforward and idiomatically perfect English, are aimed more at a non-Egyptian audience presumably unfamiliar with the details of her country's history and mores than toward her own countrywomen, who don't have easy access to her book at this time.

Perhaps for this reason she goes into a bit too much detail on events that most informed readers would be aware of. On the other hand, she goes into too little detail on other points. More attention should have been given to the peculiar dynamics of being a member of the Coptic minority in predominantly Muslim Egypt, to the way it affects her relationship to Islamic law and her perception by the authorities as a renegade and troublemaker.

These omissions, however, do not in any way seriously compromise a work that so frequently glows with impassioned honesty. Said, who currently teaches at Southern Connecticut State University, has written a book well worth reading for its insights into both contemporary Egyptian culture and the status and struggle of third-world feminists. And its publication is all the more timely, given the recent United Nations Decade for Women's Conference in Nairobi and continuing struggle by Sadat's widow, Jihan, for reformation of the one-sided divorce laws in Egypt.

Edward A. Sklepowich is a professor of comparative literature and American studies and will be affiliated with the University of Algiers during the coming academic year as a senior Fulbright fellow.